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## Honors Scholarship and Forum for Honors

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SAM SCHUMAN

# Honors Scholarship and Forum for Honors

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GUILFORD COLLEGE (1984)

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA, MORRIS (2004)

VADIMIR NABOKOV, my favorite twentieth-century author, was the most self-reflexive of novelists: he would have been delighted with our present enterprise, a discussion in the *Forum for Honors* devoted to the subject of *Forum for Honors*. The questions we are attempting to address, although they tend toward the self-referential, are important. Our journal has grown, evolved, and developed into something different than the admirable publication begun by Vishnu Bhatia and ably continued under the direction of Scott Vaughn. It is timely to pause, examine what *Forum* has been and is today, and, most vitally, what it should aim to become in the future.

In suggesting this task to me, the current Editor asked that I consider “what it is to write well about Honors education.” This seemed to me a reasonable task, until I began to do it. At that moment I had two enfeebling thoughts. The first was that Bob’s assignment carried the implicit assumption that one knew what it was to “write well” about ANYTHING, and yet to me at least, the definition of solid scholarship is anything but clear. My second enervating epiphany was that there could be no better way to appear foolish than to write poorly about “what it is to write well.”

Proceeding with a caution approaching cowardice, then, I want to discuss at some length two important characteristics of good scholarly writing, about Honors (or English, or Physics, or Economics, or what-have-you). I will introduce several illustrative examples, and make a special effort to utilize also negative examples and contrary illustrations, designed to make clear my ideas about some of the pitfalls into which serious writers about honors have plunged or are most likely to encounter. The characteristics I wish to discuss are abstraction and documentation.

Good scholarship is abstract. By this I suggest that it is generalized or generalizable; that it articulates insights, suggests actions, or makes propositions which are based upon thoughts and principles; and that it is, to at least some extent, separable from a specific time and place. I need to note, with unseemly haste, that “abstract” writing need and should not be “vague” Nor, as I will suggest further a bit later, should it be grounded in unsupported theorizing or mere opinion. It is “abstract” to say “God exists,” or “good buildings are constructed to last for a long time.” It is vague to say that “the evidence which seems to suggest that God does not exist, in one form or another, is not overwhelmingly persuasive.” Somewhat more pointedly, it would be an admirable abstraction to posit “Honors students are politically more

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conservative than non-Honors students.” I wish to suggest a definition of “abstract” which opposes that term to “particular,” not to “concrete.”

To be specific, I do not believe that *Forum for Honors* should remain a venue for articles which simply aim to describe particular Honors enterprises—programs, courses, budgets, recruitment schemes, or whatever. Such descriptions are not without interest to Honors workers, and I continue to look forward to seeing them in our organizational newsletter, but they do not really belong in a “scholarly journal.” Obviously specific illustrative examples should be cited in support of abstractions—that is what I discuss under “documentation.” If an Honors course is used as an illustration of a thesis about the nature of honors courses, nothing could be more appropriate. But I believe our organization, and its journal, have grown beyond the point where a major preoccupation should be the exchange of straightforward descriptive data: “here is what we do at The University of Ex; now you tell me what you do at Zee College.”

Good scholarly writing about Honors cannot be just abstract, of course. There are some qualifications. I would suggest that the sorts of abstractions about Honors education I would like to see in *Forum* would be: a) important, b) new, and c) interesting.

All of us have seen far too many scholarly journals brim full of articles which are certainly abstract, and adequately documented, but which are not of the least importance. Let us NOT let *Forum* become a forum for the scholarly parading of trivia. What we are doing in the Honors movement is important—we are providing better-than-average educational opportunities for better-than-average students. If educating students is important, and it is, then Honors is important. By way of illustration, the question of what constitutes a general honors curriculum seems to me an important question. By contrast, the question of whether Honors directors should report to chief academic officers or elsewhere (while it may be an issue of some political consequence in some specific situations) seems to me an essentially unimportant matter. To be blunt, I would urge the editorial board and editor of *Forum* to begin their assessment of submitted articles by asking the question “who cares?” about each contribution. If the honest answer is “hardly anybody” or “nobody,” the article should be politely and firmly rejected.

Successful submissions to *Forum for Honors* should represent new insights, conclusions, methodologies, or subject matters. The Honors movement in America is only some two decades old, and up to now, most everything that anybody has said or written about has not been articulated before. But experienced and careful listeners and readers have started to notice us repeating ourselves. One of the major functions *Forum for Honors* can serve, and, indeed, has served, is to be a marker of the state of knowledge about Honors education. As such, it should become an incentive to push the boundaries of that knowledge ahead, not a shrine in which the same ideas are repeated with increasing reverence and decreasing thought.

Finally, the articles in our journal should be interesting. They should be well written. We have an opportunity to buck the trend of jargonism and incomprehensibility which clog the pages of so many of our scholarly publications. I am unable to resist an example. Here is a sentence from an article in the October, 1984 PMLA:

Unlike, say, her (probable) contemporary, Chretien de Troyes, who, in his *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* (c. 1177) or his *Le Conte du Graal* (c. 1181-91), explains that he writes at the behest of a patron(ess) who has bestowed on him, in the first instance the *matiere et san* of his romance (*Chevalier*, line 26) and, in the second, the book he is charged with translating (*Conte*, lines 61 -68), Marie prefaces her collection of *Lais* with a contrary statement.

I suggest that we refrain, with enthusiasm, from accepting for publication any piece which contains such a sentence!

Not only should our articles avoid leaden prose, they should also aim to attract and hold our interest, as readers, with an occasional touch of humor or felicitous moment of rhetorical style.

Good writing about Honors education will also be interesting if, as suggested earlier, it is about matters which are both new and important; if it is illustrated with novel or dramatic or noteworthy examples; if it is controversial, clear, and strong.

If good writing about Honors education is abstract and general as opposed to particularized and anecdotal it is also characterized by solid documentation. Indeed it is documentation which marks the difference between opinion and scholarship. If we seek *Forum for Honors* articles which suggest theoretical analyses we must also insist that theory be firmly grounded in verifiable fact.

An abstract thesis can be supported in at least two ways: illustrations which illuminate and undergird the thesis can be presented; supportive statements from authoritative sources can be cited. It would seem to me that most serious writing about Honors education might wish to utilize both sorts of documentation: that is examples drawn from real-life honors situations can explain and clarify an author's points, and relevant writing on related issues can be invoked to help verify them. How will we recognize excellent documentation in scholarly writing about Honors?

First, it will be honest. Of course, we would find inexcusable outright fakery of evidence or blatant misquoting. More common, and less criminal, but equally unacceptable, scholarly authors have been known to cite secondary sources in such a way as to slightly skew the original intent of the author being quoted, or to report experiments or observations with such selectivity as to suggest more clarity of outcome than was strictly the case. Certainly an honors publication should insist upon the highest standards of academic integrity and full-fledged commitment to truth-seeking—in short, to honorable research practices.

Second, genuine documentation is full. Our editorial policies should encourage, even demand, more than token or partial proof. All major points in a good piece will be documented, and all major sources noted.

Third, as noted earlier, good documentation, especially in the area of illustrative examples, can be interesting. It does not hurt if a point is made with a dramatic or humorous illustration.

Fourth, good evidence is authoritative. For better or worse, scholarship tends to be understood as central and as peripheral, and there is almost always some writing "on the fringe" which could be used to support the most outlandish of conclusions. If

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writing about Honors education is to be taken seriously, it should be supported by the citation of scholars who are generally thought to know what they are talking about.

Finally, documentation which is authoritative, honest, full, and interesting will be persuasive: it will tend to convince a rational reader of the truth of the proposition being advanced.

What is it to write well about Honors education? It is to communicate general ideas and insights which are new, important, and interesting, supported by persuasive and forthright documentation. What should such writing be about?

I believe it would be counterproductive to attempt to define the territory of Honors scholarship. It would also almost surely be humiliating, because I would inevitably excise some absolutely vital area, probably at the expense of a trivial one. Rather than draw borders, I would like to propose a few samples, to suggest, rather than prescribe. I want to suggest a few questions which are important to us, which I have not yet seen completely answered (although some excellent work has been begun on several of these topics already).

Honors Students—What admission criteria for Honors students really work? [Has anyone ever scientifically tested for correlations between SAT, high school record, etc., and success in Honors courses?] What happens to comparable students who do and who do not enter Honors programs? [Do they have the same success as undergraduates? What do they do after college?] What is the “out-of-class” profile of a “typical” Honors student? [Does she or he participate in athletics, in the fine arts, student government, etc.?] Is there a difference between the profile of Honors students at comparable institutions? [How do the students at Ohio State and the University of Maryland; or at Cornell and Guilford Colleges compare?]

Honors Faculty—What Departments tend to contribute disproportionately to Honors faculty? How are Honors faculty members compensated? How do Honors faculty members evaluate their experiences teaching Honors students and Honors courses? Is teaching Honors faculty development? What is the record of Honors teachers as productive scholars?

Curriculum—Has there been a development, a substantial alteration, in Honors curricula in the past decade or two decades? To what extent are Honors courses repositories of “classical” learning on our campuses? To what extent are Honors courses carrying the burden of pedagogical and curricular experimentation on our campuses? Have Honors courses been transmuted into the college-wide curriculum? What is—or should, or could be—the relationship between Honors and “experiential learning?”

Historical Analysis—What were the earliest “Honors Programs” in the U.S., how have they evolved, and what are they like now? How have factors like the growth of the mega-university and the explosion of the community college system changed Honors education in America? How long do Honors programs tend to last at American colleges and universities? Are there patterns evident in the national leadership of the Honors movement? [Who have been N.C.H.C.’s presidents over these two decades, and the members of the Executive Council? What sorts of institutions or areas of the country or academic disciplines have they represented?]

Pedagogy/Classroom Issues—Can Honors courses be demonstrated to be different from other courses? Is there a relationship between Honors courses and class size? Is there a pattern of grading in Honors courses which differs from that in other classes? How do students evaluate Honors courses? Are there definable characteristics of “Honors Courses”?

Miscellaneous Samples—Is there a relationship between Honors and politics? [How does a given political climate influence Honors education?] Is there a common career path for Honors directors? [Where do they come from? Where do they go? How long do they stay?] How have women and minorities been included and been excluded from Honors education? [Honors programs in women’s colleges, black colleges, etc., as well as within integrated institutions.] What does “Honors” mean? [A philosophical investigation, perhaps.] Honors and Computers—a microcosm of the academic community? Are Honors students and faculty more liberal, more conservative, or more-or-less the same as other students and faculty within an institution? What are the top 10 “best-sellers” on Honors course reading lists nationally? What is the history of the Honors Semesters, and what has happened to those who attended them? Are certain regions of the country “hotbeds” of Honors? Which? Why?

This list is really a very random sampling of questions that research could answer, and that I hope many of us might like to see resolved. Surely, most readers of *Forum for Honors* could compile a similar or better selection of topics. To paraphrase Dryden’s comment on Chaucer, “here is God’s plenty!” Since there is no lack of interesting and important things for us to write about, and since among our number are many, many thorough and skilled researchers and writers, I have no difficulty in envisioning, and even in predicting, a splendid future for *Forum for Honors*.

